

Signifying Toussaint: Language and African-American Empowerment

By

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B.A. May 1999, The College of Notre Dame of Maryland

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of

Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of the George Washington University in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

May 16, 2004

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Introduction

Africans in the New World: A Linguistic Journey

In the great migration that fueled the African slave trade in the Americas, Africans, in effect, became global citizens. For roughly two and a half centuries, native Africans were forced from their homeland into abominable conditions—mental and physical—across the Atlantic. Yet despite the unimaginable traumas of the Middle Passage as well as the despicable state of their lives in slavery, Africans managed to carry elements of their culture into the New World. Language, music, religion, and sacred beliefs survived the journey and helped the slaves rebuild a collective identity in the Americas—one that can be witnessed in the Western Hemisphere now, in the twenty-first century. The resilience of the African heritage outside of the African continent more than two centuries ago proves that the most valuable elements of a civilization can be transported intact, even under the most difficult conditions. These intangible elements include ancient chants, creation stories, rituals, and rites that together form a person's most basic understanding of the world.

In certain parts of the New World, like the United States, the harsh conditions of slavery precluded Africans early on from making much progress toward forging a new community. Elsewhere, however, less strict societies permitted slaves

times and space to meet and carry on traditions among themselves. Within the Caribbean, for instance, racial social structures emerged that were much more fluid than the static black-or-white designations in the United States. In colonial Haiti, nine categories of race hierarchized citizens by their amounts of Afro or Anglo blood, resulting in a society in which societal standing could not always be intuited by observation of skin color.

In Cuba, prior to the sugar boom in the late eighteenth century, only about two hundred and fifty slaves entered the country per year, and the majority of these slaves did not work on plantations but were distributed among different localities and types of service. At the bottom of the Cuban social hierarchy were the most recent arrivals from Africa, *bozales* or *negros de naciones*, who usually did field work on the plantations (Paquette 35). A step above the *bozales*, those who learned to communicate in Spanish or Afro-Spanish patois graduated to *ladinos* and might have been eligible for less demanding work (Paquette 38). *Criollo* slaves were born and raised in Cuba, and fared better, obtaining more advantageous positions as artisans, drivers, urban slaves for hire, or house slaves (38). As compared with field slaves, urban slaves worked fewer hours, so they had leisure time to enjoy city diversions such as taverns, dances, nonwhite social clubs, and cockfights. During this period, slaveholders in Cuban cities relied more on colonial acculturation than on violence to guide slave behavior—specifically, slaves were taught to behave because society expected it of them. (Paquette 38). Thus, within the islands, a quite Afrocentric culture developed, which in turn acted as a catalyst for slaves to try to earn their liberty. The emerging black communities in places like Haiti and Cuba permitted slaves to band together and elevate themselves. The earliest and most striking

example of this was the Haitian revolution from 1791 until 1804. The great Haitian ex-slave Toussaint L' Ouverture led the Afro-Haitians to freedom in a fight that drew inspiration from African traditions and mythology. As we will see in this paper, Toussaint demonstrated for the world the viability of an African community transplanted in the New World.

In this paper, I will begin by examining the intriguing tactics of Toussaint L'Ouverture. Aside from his military skills, Toussaint relied on what literary theorist Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls signifying, a uniquely African-American form of rhetoric, to operate between the various cultures of the Africans, the French, the Spanish, and the Americans. Gates defines signifying as a sly, double-voiced, non-Western system of African-American vernacular that finds its roots in the mythology of Africa. Through rhetorical strategies like irony, parody, and revision of historical ideologies and slogans, Toussaint L'Ouverture managed to capitalize on the African lingual traditions familiar to him, as well as alter the Western language to send messages that benefited the slaves. Toussaint's mutable use of such rhetoric made his statements open to multiple interpretations by his listeners. This "interpretability" gained him the respect among the diverse groups involved in the revolution and opened up passages for Toussaint to operate freely and achieve his aims of liberation for the Haitian slaves. As we will see, Toussaint signified so widely that his true intentions have blurred, and ultimately are unknowable history. As a leader and historical figure, however, Toussaint has gone on to greatly inspire generations of African Americans in ways that, in scope, even surpass the value of his original role.

In the second half of my paper I will jump ahead half a century to the late 1840s through the 1850s to explore the abolitionist era in the United States and show that African Americans have been able to appropriate Toussaint's linguistic techniques and even reconstruct images of Toussaint as needed to fight slavery and oppression. By extension, black abolitionists capitalized on the islands of the Caribbean as a site of renewal for their audiences. As a location outside of the free-white/enslaved-black binary of the United States, the Caribbean breaks down essentialist realities and replaces them with hybrid, mutable possibilities. As Antonio Benítez-Rojo promotes in a bit of philosophy on the nature of the Caribbean,

within the sociocultural fluidity that the Caribbean archipelago presents, within its historiographic turbulence and its ethnological and linguistic clamor, within its generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane, one can sense the features of an island that "repeats" itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs (3).

This is not to say that the region comes without its own legacy of colonial oppression. For the mid-nineteenth-century African-American abolitionist, however, the Caribbean offered a site of production that permitted them to turn the slaves' struggle for freedom into a worldwide issue. A reading of abolitionist texts of William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany will demonstrate the foundational effect of a historical consciousness on the project of abolitionism. Brown, Douglass, and Delany escaped the hegemonic boundaries imposed by life in the United States at that time by reimagining African Americans' enslavement as a historical migration of community. They predicted that the cultural elements that had bound Africans together through the hardships of

slavery could be called upon to enable African Americans to put a definitive end to their enslavement. Whether this location was Haiti, Liberia, or simply upstate New York, these abolitionists showed the black population of the U.S. that they were, in fact, capable of crossing boundaries and living wherever they desired. Although each abolitionist has his own ideology, all three engage in signifying in texts aimed to empower their African-American readers and call upon Toussaint to bring free and enslaved African Americans alike to action. Above all, Brown, Douglass, and Delany stress literacy as a mode of liberation for enslaved blacks, since literacy promised a sure source of knowledge about their rich cultural histories, in turn a well of strength in the blacks' struggle. By comparing and contrasting these three influential abolitionists, I will demonstrate how a group of people can construct versions of the past in ways that reflect their communal consciousness, breach the boundaries imposed by the hegemonic power, and put new realities into motion.

Before I begin my exploration of Toussaint, I will offer a brief overview of signifying as a cultural tool and means of appropriating language. In a contemporary effort to read African-American literature on its own terms, literary theorists like Gates have looked to the historic tropes of ancient African myths for a system of interpretation unhindered by Western concepts. These myths, critics have found, were informed by a rich tradition of orality—a tradition that has carried through to black American vernacular and African-American literature itself. Rather than strictly contrasting the African oral tradition with more recent black writing, Gates sought to let the two forms of communication work together. As he found, the African people constantly grapple with

plurality of meaning, constructing meanings through comparisons of differences among messages. Here, Gates borrows from Jacques Derrida's definition of *différance*, a term that gets at the complicated relationship between language (signifier) and reality (signified), which at once depends on a system of actual difference between the sign and the meaning—an idea borrowed from Saussure—and the temporal instability inherent in any definition (Gates 46). As a meaning-making system, language—both oral and written—is transmutable. Given the myriad subtleties possible within a single spoken statement depending on tone of voice, body language, inflection, and facial expression, difference would seem to be particularly omnipresent within native African speech. In the Americas, black vernacular has retained its traditional “difference” in the sense that African Americans have a unique means of implication that demonstrates the extreme versatility of the culture.

Gates delves into the African-American Signifying Monkey poems for a foundation for his exploration of black vernacular. The tale of the poem starts with three characters, the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant,

who are bound together in a trinary relationship. The Monkey, a trickster figure. . .who is full of guile, who tells lies, and who is a rhetorical genius—is intent on demystifying the Lion's self-imposed status as King of the Jungle. The Monkey, clearly, is no match for the Lion's physical prowess; the Elephant is, however. The Monkey's task then, is to trick the Lion into tangling with the Elephant, who is the true King of the Jungle for everyone else in the animal kingdom. This the Monkey does with a rhetorical trick, a trick of mediation (Gates 56).

Signifying, then, is a rhetorical game that as linguist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan contends, “incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always

sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations” (314). She cites examples such as left-handed compliments and double entendres as modes of signifying. Folklore theorist Roger Abrahams says that “it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, ‘my brother needs a piece of cake’” (52). Gates also notes that signifying has earned a bad reputation in white society for being derogatory and dishonest, but represents a disruption at the level of the conceptual that critiques the nature of white meaning (47-8). Unlike Saussure’s concept of signification, African-American signifying makes its own critique of its object. In speech or writing, Mitchell-Kernan explains, signifying must include some sense of indirection (312). She also stresses that the signified message usually carries a sense of ill-will, aggression, or disturbance toward a third party aside from the speaker and addressee, as we saw in the vignette of the Monkey and the Lion (322). Hence, the qualities of signifying that have earned it a bad reputation among whites are the very same traits that make it such a subversive instrument for African Americans.

Chapter 1

Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution: A Legacy of Signifying

Toussaint L'Ouverture, the grandson of an African king, learned the language of the Aradas (a tribe in Dahomey) as well as the medicinal use of plants from his Africa-born father. From his godfather, Toussaint learned the basics of French and Latin and also learned to draw (James 20). As an adult, Toussaint gained the respect of his master and received the post of coachman, which permitted him some time to read on his own. Most influentially, he read the work by Abbe Raynal on the East and West Indies, and so understood the state of European colonialism, knowledge that served him well in future years (James 91). The unusual educational opportunities of this Creole slave certainly forged the path for his vital role in the Haitian Revolution. Although fluent only in Creole, Toussaint particularly applied language to construct his own power. To communicate within the various social groups—African, French, Spanish, American, and Creole—Toussaint used nonverbal methods as well as dictation and revision to extend his message to audiences. As a reading of Toussaint's application of language will show, his varied and complicated appropriations of signs and meanings drew copiously from African traditions and borrowed slyly from the white ideals of the French. Toussaint, through his own linguistic playing, or signifying, set in motion a system of leadership that

challenged the previous realities of both African and Western cultures while operating from within their very boundaries. This innovative lingual leadership created fissures within the framework of the colonial slave system that would guide future generations of slaves and abolitionists in the Americas.

According to literary theorist Michel Foucault, power relations exist within a society as a web encompassing all human relationships. Power itself cannot be possessed, but is exercised (Shumway 139). Resistance, rather than constantly working in opposition to power, originates within it, ‘producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and affecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them’ (Foucault 96). Contrary to traditional notions, both rulers and the oppressed can share power in Foucault’s model. This idea is central to understanding exactly how Toussaint, a Creole slave of Dahomean descent, came to hold a position of high authority within the ethnically diverse Haitian culture and affect change in the western, namely French, one. While Toussaint undoubtedly possessed great military prowess that would have been central to his success in physically capturing the island, I would argue that the foundation of Toussaint’s power lay in the hands of his troops and followers, mostly ex-slaves like himself. Their implicit faith in his capabilities and their willingness to band together under his direction speaks to Toussaint’s skills as a communicator. Almost two-thirds of the slaves in Haiti in 1791 had been born, raised, and socialized in Africa (Thornton 183). Those slaves came mainly from the Yoruba region of the African continent, but also included members of Dahomean and Bakongo tribes. According to historian John Thornton, in Haiti at that time, slaves loosely grouped

themselves by their African region of origin or by ethnolinguistic group (200). Thus, Toussaint had to bridge these various social groups to earn the respect of all whom he came to represent.

To fully comprehend the manner in which Toussaint communicated with the slaves, it becomes necessary to examine African oral tradition. Unlike Western forms of written language, African oral literature always depends on the presence of a body—it requires a performance for its own survival. Hence, body language is viewed as integral to the speaker's message, and is believed to offer insight on his or her true intentions (Àjàyí 12 and 31). Structurally, certain African tribal languages are tonal, meaning that the speakers of the language use pitch to distinguish between words. Walter Ong notes that this use of pitch differs from the sort of pitch present in the English language, in that tribespeople use pitch to enunciate between homonyms, while speakers of English use pitch to convey a particular sense of a word, as in the raising of tone at the end of a sentence when asking a question. Thus, in the tribal language a single word can mean many different things all depending on the tone of its pronunciation (Ong 414). Ong gives the following example from the Lokele language of Western Africa:

The syllables represented in writing or print as *lisaka* can have three meanings: if the syllables are pronounced all on the same pitch, the resulting word means 'pond'; if the final syllable is raised in tone the resulting word means 'promise' (the noun); if the last two syllables are raised in tone the resulting word means 'poison' (the noun) (414).

This case, in theory, lends credence to the ways that Toussaint later used language—shiftily and interpretably. In practice, the ways of African orality reveal an adaptable means of communication still at work in the Haitian slave society near the turn of the

nineteenth century.

Another interesting and important aspect of African tonal language lies in the centrality of music to the culture, mainly through drumming. In African societies drums function in diverse roles, from background music for dancing to ‘intoning the most sacred truths known to the people’ (Armstrong 360). Since this type of language relies heavily on pitch, rather than the specific sounds of vowels and consonants as in English, African tribes can communicate over long distances with the help of drums (Ong 414). Like the various cadences of the spoken languages, drumbeats would follow the tones and number of syllables in any given word. Yet Ong warns that ‘a given sequence of tones does not signal a very determined meaning at all, but remains quite ambiguous. If however, a set of tones is put into a context, the context can eliminate many or all of the ambiguities. . . especially if the supplied context is a stereotyped one’ (415). Thus, ‘drum talk,’ as a system of meaning making, relies in part on a set of stereotyped phrases that serve to impart distinct messages to the listeners. Notably, drums occupy a place of great spiritual importance within African religions and by extension, voodoo. Critic Eric Sundquist contends that black music conveyed the continuity of African culture, and that drumming, in slave societies, retained the resonance of the sacred power within ancient African communities (166-7).

Despite the fact that slaveholders attempted to break ties between Africans of similar tribes during colonial slave times, slaves tended to resist those attempts and retained to an extent their ethnic and lingual traditions. This retention occurred most often in Caribbean nations, where slaves had relatively more personal freedom than those in the

United States. Perhaps the interpretable nature of tonal language enabled individuals of different tribes to quickly learn to communicate under the stressful circumstances. In any case, Alejo Carpentier credits the occurrence of slave meetings and dances, which were sometimes permitted on plantations—especially on Sundays, with preserving African language and culture throughout the years of slavery. We see that Africans carried their language with them when forced into slavery, and drum talk continued to bind them together even in slavery. Clearly, drums acted as an impetus for the great Haitian slave revolt that began in 1791: ‘The big drums are an important instrument of propaganda in time of war. [Certain Africans] have told me that the psychological impact is tremendous when a great drum says ‘War! War! War!’ for two or three days without stopping” (Armstrong 360). And Carpentier reminds us that

On the night of August 14, 1791, an event of momentous import transpired in the French colony of Saint Domingue. While voodoo drums droned on in Bois Caiman, two hundred delegates from the slave plantations of the Northern Plain gathered under a torrential downpour, summoned by an enlightened leader named Boukman, to drink the tepid blood of a black pig and swear an oath of rebellion (212).

Even though Toussaint reportedly was not present at the voodoo ceremony that spurred on the revolution, it remains important that his future troops overwhelmingly heeded the directive of the drums. Also notable is historian Carolyn Fick’s assertion that Toussaint carefully disguised his participation in the event and its related activities (3).

Returning to Toussaint’s operation within Haitian society, it seems unavoidable that Toussaint would have, by necessity, communicated with the slaves on their own terms—in their own language. A good leader speaks in the voice of his or her

followers. As we know of Toussaint, spoke his native Aradas tongue with his family (Beard 36). Without a doubt, Toussaint would have spoken an African tongue or some form of Creole with his troops, as they were rarely fluent in any Romance language.

Wenda Parkinson mentions that

Toussaint was often slow in coming to the major decisions in his life, needing some small spur to make him act, or like so many of his race waiting for some signal, some omen to guide him. He was a Catholic but Dahomey lurked behind his back. . .[he needed] time to walk among his men. . .There were old friends among them, men from Breda, men from the Aradas tribe to whom he would stop and talk their own tongue. They trusted him, to them he was considered their chieftain (63).

Even more convincing, “as far as his men were concerned. . .he was a genial father, and when they were downhearted he would encourage them to sing” (Parkinson 80). Whether because of his own ties to his African history or due to the necessity of catering to his troops, Toussaint certainly drew upon facets of African lingual tradition to unify and earn the respect of the slaves serving under him.

Toussaint also related to his troops through religion, and utilized voodoo imagery to instill trust among his followers. Robert Farris Thompson recounts that Afro-Haitians outwardly practiced the religion required by the Catholics, yet privately engaged in a system of thought that hybridized their traditions (18). Indeed, a closer look at Haiti’s black population prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo correctly argues, reveals a people steeped in African faith:

This vast population of hundreds of thousands of men and women of African origin maintained many of their customs, among them the cults that the [Catholic] Church prohibited. These old slaves. . .were the ones who kept alive the cults devoted to Damballah, Papa Legba, to Ogun, the voodoo and petro cults. . .to whose sacred drums the greater part of the Haitian

population, especially in the countryside, still responds” (Benítez-Rojo 67).

Benítez-Rojo further states that voodoo itself can be credited with rallying the Haitians to revolt under the direction of Toussaint, since it invaded so much of the slaves’ own self-conceptions and served to focus, organize, and unite them (162). In spite of historians’ insistence on his strong Catholic faith, Toussaint, on his part, seems uncannily linked to voodoo folk beliefs, which Henry Louis Gates describes in his study of Afrocentric mythology. Gates explores the trickster figure, called Esu-Elegbara, who permeates the folklore of West Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and the United States; according to tradition, the trickster acts as a mediator and interprets the will of the gods for his people. Esu “becomes the imperative companion-messenger of each deity, the imperative messenger-companion of the devotee,” explains Robert Farris Thompson. “The cult of [Esu]-Elegbara transcends the limits of ordinary affiliation” (19). Interestingly, Gates notes that in Haitian society the trickster figure is embodied by the voodoo *loa* Papa Legba (5).

If we trust Benítez-Rojo’s contention that “when L’Ouverture had a place at the head of the revolution, his soldiers called him Papa Toussaint and associated him with Papa Legba,” it becomes clear how Toussaint quickly established a high standing among the slaves. Toussaint’s choice of surname, L’Ouverture, meaning “the opening,” directly corresponds to Papa Legba, “the keeper (hence the *opener*) of the Gate of Destiny” in the voodoo religion (Korngold 101, emphasis added). To clarify, the great *loa* Papa Legba controls access to the spirits for Haitian followers of voodoo (Hurbon 791). During religious rituals, serviteurs (voodoo initiates) sing, “*Papa Legba, louvri baryè pou mwen/*

lò mwen tounen mwen mèsì w... [Papa Legba, open the gate for me,/ when I return, I will thank you...]" (Hurbon 791-92). Papa Legba leads the believers through the gates of the crossroads "where sky and earth join" and that will lead them back to Guinea, the mythical Africa. This spiritual crossing, voodoo followers believe even today, will restore totality to their lives and community (Hurbon 792). Certainly, crossing the gates at the admittance of Papa Legba was the most sublime spiritual desire for the Haitian slave, since as Laënnec Hurbon explains, "Vodou represents the place par excellence where the Haitian strives to recover the identity that was dislocated by his physical removal from African soil and by the economic and social oppression endured from slavery to the present" (Hurbon 792). Thompson, too, assures us that some groups implicitly trusted that the individual at the crossroads was fully capable of governing people (109). When Toussaint repudiated the name of his former master, Breda, in favor of L'Ouverture, he aligned himself with the loa of the crossroads. Whatever his professed opinions of voodoo, Toussaint, as a former slave, understood his people; his self-christening linguistically endowed him with some of Papa Legba's stature.

Over his span of leadership in Haiti, Toussaint seems to have adopted several other traits of the African trickster, further linking himself to Legba. Indeed, Toussaint utilized dictation in his public correspondence, as one biographer writes, "his secretaries wrote and re-wrote until he got the exact meaning he wanted" (James 104). According to Gates, Legba, the trickster, "connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures," namely through dictation to an interpreter, and later approval of the translation (12). In these dictations lie the bifurcation of Toussaint's scheme, since while

this practice mirrored that of African tradition and merited the trust of the slaves, it also earned him respect among the various political factions in Haiti and abroad. Thus, through translation, Toussaint managed to reinscribe the ancient tribal practice and invent a new means of communication, one that both endeared him to the Haitians and enlightened the Western world as to his intentions.

The acts of dictation and ensuing inscription themselves take on special significance in this case because they are the mode of Foucault's web of power, here shared by Toussaint, embodying the oppressed Haitians, and the hybrid mixture of educated scribes, representing the hegemonic, Western ideology alongside the more obscure motivations of the mulattoes. If we take into account the importance of these practices in Haitian religion, then Toussaint's engagement of such practices—filtering his ideas through a scribe—serves to legitimate the cause for black Haitian freedom primarily through the scope of Western hegemony. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, in which a group wielding power over another group seeks to render whatever is Other less strange and therefore more *safe*, clarifies the value of this legitimization:

Philosophically, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism; anyone employing Orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality" (72).

Applying Said's Orientalism to power operations in Haiti, it becomes obvious that by permitting his thoughts to be translated to the page by a white European secretary, Toussaint purposely rendered himself less strange to his audience. He gave the French the

ammunition they thought that they needed to quench his power. At once he “officialized” his statements in Western handwriting and offered the French government the space to imagine that they had true control over his actions. Said, however, also warns that certain treatments of history reveal more about the fantasies of those in power than the realities of the actual people and cultures that existed. To turn this argument on its head and get more at Said’s purpose for writing, I believe that Toussaint’s act of dictation, in the terms of his African heritage, counters the force of the white secretaries and proves that nothing can ever be fixed, or made static, with language. A look at some of Toussaint’s dictated texts shows that his methods of communication strangely catered to the ways reality has been created in the West.

For example, in one of Toussaint’s earliest calls for soldiers, written in 1793 while he was allied with the Spanish, he states:

Brothers and friends. I am Toussaint L’Ouverture, my name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in San Domingo. I work to bring them into existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause. ‘Your very humble and obedient servant.’ (Signed) Toussaint L’Ouverture, ‘General of the Armies of the King, for the Public Good.’ (from *Lettres de Toussaint-L’Ouverture*, qtd. in James 125).

First, notice Toussaint’s confidence in his own popularity—“my name is perhaps known to you,” and the silent allusion to the voodoo crossroads. At the same time, Toussaint aligns himself with these slaves, calling them brothers, and then goes on to subjugate himself as a “humble and obedient servant.” He has offered three versions of himself—leader, equal, and subservient—to occupy the imaginations of the public. Most striking, though, is his use of the great French slug words “Liberty and Equality,”

Foucauldian in its reappropriation of a concept that in France purely excluded blacks at that time. Here Toussaint uses language to break down the very barriers that the Europeans sought to impose, all the while promising respect and devotion to those Western principles. Finally, his signed title reinforces his standing in the Spanish army, a reference to a monarchy that conflicts with the ideals of the French Jacobins. Regarding Toussaint's changes of European alliance, C.L.R. James explains, "although [Toussaint] had fought under the flag of the counter-revolution, he knew where his power lay, and under the very noses of the Spanish commanders he continued to call the blacks to freedom" (131).

Upon returning to the French army in 1794, two months after the French National Convention abolished slavery, Toussaint wrote to a fellow black leader:

For a time the Spaniards had blinded my eyes, but I did not take long to recognize their rascality. I abandoned them and have beaten them well. I returned to my country which received me with open arms and has recompensed my services well. I beg of you, my dear brother, to follow my example. . . I hope that you will not refuse me, who am as black as yourself, and, I assure you, wish nothing more than to see you happy, you and all your brothers. As far as I am concerned I believe that our only hope of this is in serving the French Republic. It is under its flag that we are truly free and equal (from *Lettres de Toussaint-L'Ouverture*, qtd. in James 150).

Toussaint's contrite and respectful tone here could be read by both the Haitian blacks and the French as a sign of truthful devotion. Yet Toussaint tells us himself in his letter that he has beaten the Spanish, a sign that his onetime alliance with them was flimsy at best, and served only his own purposes. Given the fact that he rejoined the French at an auspicious moment for the blacks and also for himself since the French consulate had begun to depend more on the black soldiers for defense against the mulattoes, it appears

that Toussaint saw an opportunity for the advancement of his aims. Thus, his letter, while earning him more supporters, also underscores the transmutability of his intentions.

His transmutability also asserts itself in the way that Toussaint employed familial terms toward those he sought to endear to him. Understandably and as we have seen, Toussaint repetitively used the word “brother,” almost as a chant, when addressing the slaves and free blacks. Yet he dichotomously used the same sort of language with certain whites—for example, Laveaux, the French commander in Haiti at the time that Toussaint returned to French service. Historians overwhelmingly agree on the emotional nature of Toussaint’s relationship with Laveaux, and generally portray an idolization for the Frenchman on Toussaint’s part. James describes Toussaint as suspicious and reserved, but assures us that he “had absolute faith in Laveaux and never trusted any other man, black, white, or brown” (161). Toussaint himself wrote to Laveaux: “I do not know how to express my thanks for all the pleasant things that you have said to me, and how happy I am to have so good a father who loves me as much as you do. Be sure that your son is your sincere friend, that he will support you until death.” (Toussaint qtd. in James 161). Of course, Parkinson notes the odd fact that Toussaint was the elder of the two men, which hints at the fact that the real relationship between Toussaint and Laveaux was much more complex than the typical father-son dynamic (101). For Toussaint, newly realigned with the French, Laveaux held a position that permitted him to further Toussaint’s cause—a good relationship with Laveaux was central to Toussaint’s interests. On May 18, 1794, Toussaint wrote to Laveaux:

. . . I have seen the Decree of the National Convention, dated February 4,

1794, declaring the abolition of slavery: this is most comforting news for all friends of the human race. Let us therefore join together once and for all, and forget the past. Let us occupy ourselves solely with the defeating of our enemies and with avenging ourselves, in particular, on our perfidious Spanish neighbours (qtd. in Alexis 69-70).

Openly stating his reasons for changing sides on the battlefield, Toussaint fairly reassures his French superior that he and his troops will not seek revenge on the whites—the past will be forgotten. Yet his next suggestion, to focus on overcoming their enemies, displays Toussaint's linguistic playing. As history shows, Toussaint's Haitian army and the white French troops fought with very different goals in mind, and against different enemies. Whatever Toussaint's methods, he did strive for black liberation. The French, on the other hand, had economic interests at heart that often depended on the institution of slavery. While the Spanish *were* a common enemy at the time Toussaint wrote the above letter, the threats Spain posed to each differed—as Spain supported slavery and at the same time held land interests on the island of Hispaniola. So here Toussaint in fact sought to exploit a generalized wording in order to capitalize on a commonality that in reality masked worlds of difference.

Laveaux, on his part, had good reason to accept and return Toussaint's professed devotion. Not long after Toussaint returned from the Spanish side of the island, Laveaux was kidnapped by the mulattoes in a plot to send him back to France against his will, in order to instate a French representative more sympathetic toward the mulattoes. Toussaint, when made aware of the occurrence, deployed troops to rescue Laveaux and return him to his post. At the same time, Toussaint issued the proclamation to the mulattoes that 'in disrespecting the Governor you have disrespected France,' at once

reassuring *his* loyalty to both Laveaux and the French government (qtd. in Parkinson 101). In turn, Laveaux, doubtless reassured that the blacks would defend his life, publicly named Toussaint the “black Spartacus,” and at least for appearances, returned some of Toussaint’s emotion. Certainly, a closer look at the circumstances reveals a situation steeped in hidden motivations and a relationship that functioned to serve many aims and purposes. Ros, too, summarily comments that the sort of flattery Toussaint used with Laveaux only fuels a particular type of personality, which might explain why this particular one of Toussaint’s relationships stands out as so singular among his many political alliances (89).

Laveaux’s departure from Haiti, in my opinion, stands as a moment of clarity on Toussaint’s lingual relationship with France. Around the same time, Sonthonax, another French commissioner, came to Toussaint’s attention as being more supportive of the mulattoes’ interests in Haiti than greatly suited Toussaint. As the French Assembly had just then issued a directive that Haiti was to send representatives to both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, Toussaint took the opportunity to nominate Sonthonax *and* Laveaux to the posts in Paris (Parkinson 104). Had there been only one post, and if Toussaint had only nominated Laveaux, the situation would remain hazy, especially through the scope of history. Yet the concurrence of the nominations thoroughly raises suspicions regarding Toussaint’s true loyalty to Laveaux and to France. At the time, Toussaint wrote the following to Laveaux:

My General, my father, my good friend, I am sorry to say that I foresee much unpleasantness for you in this unfortunate country, for which you have sacrificed your health and your family life. In the hope that you may be

spared the sorrow of having to be a witness to a painful spectacle, I would greatly desire that you were chosen to serve as delegate in Paris. This would give you the satisfaction of seeing again your home country, your wife and your children. . .At the same time, my brothers in arms and I shall have the advantage of being represented by the most devoted advocate we could possibly imagine. Yes, my general, my father, my benefactor, France has many excellent men, but where is the man who, like you, can always be counted upon to be a faithful friend of the blacks? (qtd. in Ros 91)

Yes, Toussaint assures Laveaux that Laveaux' promotion would be to the benefit of the blacks, but why? He does not specify, but merely hints at the fact that Laveaux would be more appreciated off of the island. More notably, Toussaint's opening, "I foresee much unpleasantness for you," almost reads as a threat to Laveaux. Toussaint failed to specify from where or whom the unpleasantness would arise, instead leaving his language dangling, open to interpretation. Yet, again, Laveaux trusted the familial wording, accepted the promise of returning to his wife and children, and returned to Paris ostensibly to serve the Haitians from afar.

While Toussaint often used his letters as ways to break down borders between the blacks and the whites, as in his correspondence with Laveaux, he also dictated letters that blatantly reflected his animosity toward certain individuals.

Toussaint's strong feelings for the mulattoes, for instance, come through in his response to a white commissioner upon learning of a planned uprising headed by the mulatto Rigaud:

I could easily intercept him... 'but God forbid. I have need of Rigaud. He is violent. I want him for carrying on war; and that war is necessary to me. The mulatto caste is superior to my own. If I take Rigaud from them, they will perhaps, find another superior to him. I know Rigaud; he gives up the bridle when he gallops; he shows his arm when he strikes. For me, I gallop also; but I know where to stop; and when I strike, I am felt, not seen. M. Rigaud can

conduct insurrections only by blood and massacres; I know how to put the people in movement; but when I appear, all must be tranquil' (qtd. in Beard 93).

In theory, such language displays Toussaint's Foucauldian ethics—permitting Rigaud to hold power because the shared power suited his own interests. Yet statements like 'he gives up the bridle when he gallops' and 'he shows his arm when he strikes' throw back to the stereotyped rhetoric of his African heritage. These coined phrases illuminate Toussaint's message for one and all, pointing out to the blacks where the mulatto's faults laid, and demonstrating to the whites that he had an understanding of their imposed hierarchical class structure. He also shared his technique for keeping his enemies near at hand, a sneaky practice that carried over to his relations with the whites, but his admittance might easily have been overlooked by the French as a mere distaste for the mulattoes.

James describes Toussaint as 'self-contained, impenetrable and stern,' and tells us that he 'deliberately cultivated his own mysteriousness' (147 and 249). This quality of mysteriousness seems to stem directly from African mythology, as Gates explains that the nature of the trickster is at once individual, indeterminant, open-ended, ambiguous, and prone to both betrayal and loyalty, 'plus a plethora [of other characteristics that] taken together, only begin to present an idea of complexity of this classic figure' (6). Contrastingly, Toussaint's interpretability could reflect the effects of his European filter, facilitated by his scribes. Given the nature of translation and the ideology of Orientalism, the *true* Toussaint would be impossible to determine through others' writing. By withholding his motivations, adopting traits as needed, and always

relying on a third party to convey his thoughts to the world, Toussaint operated freely within the two distinct cultures of the slaves and the Europeans. He permitted others to see him as they wished to, in the case of the slaves, or as invisible, in the case of the French. For example, Hédouville, a special agent to Haiti, at one point acknowledged that he had, from the start, “considered Toussaint nothing but a monkey with a cloth wound around its head” (Ros 100). This underestimation ironically demonstrates how Toussaint came to hold such power within the European system. In his correspondence and interaction with the French, Toussaint relied on their language to such an extent that his real motivations became unknowable to them. Crossing the island unhindered, capturing city after city, Toussaint managed to fend off the British and the Spanish in the name of France until his troops had control of both halves of the island in 1801.

At this moment, with Toussaint physically in control of all of Haiti, power began to shift among the political players. After taking control of the Spanish half of the island, Toussaint published a constitution, a document inscribed by an assembly called up by Toussaint, consisting entirely “of rich whites and Mulattoes: there was not one black” (James 263). The text of the constitution itself abolished slavery in the country; however, Toussaint continued to import African labor, even though the Africans were promised liberty when they arrived in Haiti (James 265). Surely, this reliance on forced labor from Africa would have been rejected by the emerging black citizens, whose greatest desire was to return to Guinee, their homeland, even in death. Moreover, how could they have seen this proposal as anything but an atrocity against the sacred beliefs of voodoo, which as Benítez-Rojo asserts, had a “supersyncretism. . .dominated by African elements” (67).

Even worse, within Toussaint's constitution, all voodoo practices were forbidden and Catholicism was named the national religion, and priests obtained a high standing within the provisional government (Ros 127). While Benítez-Rojo assures us that Toussaint "did this surely for foreign policy reasons," it nevertheless caused a rupture in the flow of Toussaint's power, since here he breaks from his appearance (if nothing more) of representing the Afro-Haitians, whom we have established as the basis of his power (162). The blacks began to distrust Toussaint and no longer jumped at his every command.

The second error in Toussaint's constitution, regarding the French, was his act of naming himself Governor General for Life. He blatantly avoids giving the French any official post in his government, declaring himself sole power holder. By 1801, "all that remained of France in Haiti was the currency, the flags and the national anthem," yet these signifiers did not constitute an alliance, and France realized that (131). Thus, with a single document, Toussaint forced all members of his web of power to closely scrutinize him—a jolt that froze his operations in Haiti. Perhaps Toussaint desired this confrontation all along; he wrote regarding Napoleon (by then well on his way to becoming emperor of France) that 'Bonaparte is a fine man, and France is his. But Haiti is mine. I am not in his way, so why would he come and block my way?' (qtd. in Ros 115). Aside from his error in discussing Haiti as a piece of personal property, Toussaint here confirms that he would be willing to face Napoleon in a showdown for control of the island. Toussaint's constitution, alerting France to the state of things in Haiti, indeed triggered a confrontation between the political factions that not long after led to the

downfall of the great Haitian leader.

Toussaint L'Ouverture used language in particular ways—careful, disingenuous ways—to achieve his goals. Despite the attention bequeathed on the Haitian revolution by historians of all ancestries, today all that we can know for sure about Toussaint's aims is that he fought for the liberation of the blacks. History prevents us from coming to a full realization of what Toussaint dreamed for the future of Haiti; we can only look back on what we know of his actions and speculate, a practice that has been employed by many searching for meaning. What Toussaint has left us, however, is an odyssey of language, an odyssey that communicates through a kaleidoscopic perspective of individuals and contrasting cultures. Toussaint demonstrated how language is a shared tool, and as such, how it can be used to facilitate interaction, create change, and construct new realities. Throughout the Haitian revolution, Toussaint spun a complicated tale out of words, signals, sounds, all borrowing from multiple cultures and putting hybridity to work. In effect, Toussaint instilled Africans in the New World with a means of empowerment through language, giving rise to a new way of expression that subtly changed the perspectives of all participants.

Toussaint's historical existence was only one stage of his legacy. He endowed the Haitians and others of African descent with a method of challenging their realities. Most obviously, Toussaint led the enslaved people of Haiti toward freedom and his country to black nationhood in the New World. This positioned him within world history and placed him in the imagination of humanity. By claiming literacy for himself, as a victim of the slave system, Toussaint showed future generations of blacks that self-

education was not only possible but also imperative to creating a space for African-American thought in white American society. He taught free and enslaved blacks to operate between the boundaries imposed by culture, and to plot one culture against another to instigate change. For Toussaint, as for the African-American abolitionists we will discuss, the key to this plotting lay in language, in signifying on the foundational narratives of white society. According to critic Jacqueline Bacon, this meant “taking the master’s language, texts, premises, and using them against oppression” (285).

Chapter 2

William Wells Brown: Toussaint as Heroic Archetype

During the American abolitionist movement prior to the Civil War in the 1840s and '50s, African Americans, both free and enslaved, looked to Haiti as a sign of social strength. As a nation formed of unassisted revolt, Haiti symbolized, for blacks, hope for the future. This hope gave rise to a series of copycat attempts at insurrection in the United States—most famously those of Gabriel Prosser (1800) and Denmark Vesey (1822). Although these attempts ended in failure, they demonstrate the historical bond that existed at that time. According to historian J. Michael Dash, the sentiments of U.S. blacks extended toward Haitian citizens themselves. Black emigration to Haiti was popular with African-American abolitionists for a period, but failed, ironically, largely due to the difficult adjustment to the language and culture in Haiti for black emigrés from the U.S. (Dash 13). Nevertheless, American blacks, as members of the marginalizing discourse of the white hegemony, did not automatically perceive Haitians in terms of otherness. An “instinctive solidarity between these communities was virtually assured because they were both racially and culturally defined within a framework of biological determinism and moral disapproval” (Dash 45-6). From this “instinctive solidarity” emerged what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined community—a perceived bond between groups that

have no day-to-day contact with one another. This bond is often forged by print media, especially newspapers, but in this case, abolitionist oratory was also a primary means for conveyance of ideas. Thus, it becomes easy to see how a great historical leader like Toussaint L'Ouverture would have captured the attention of African Americans half a century after his death.

The abolitionist movement took many paths toward liberation: nonviolent moral suasion relied on a persuasive appeal to slaveholders' sense of right and wrong, rather than a call for political action or violence. As we will discuss in more detail later, Frederick Douglass deserted the moral suasionists, led by William Garrison, in favor of a more political and sometimes violent approach to liberation. At the other end of the spectrum lies rebellion, or outright violence against oppression, a longstanding and active alternative that, of course, has its roots in Haitian history. Both William Wells Brown and Martin Delany favored rebellion as a means to involve African Americans in their own fight for freedom. Abolitionists also differed on their stance as to how slavery should end. Those who believed that slavery would somehow taper off on its own fell into the gradualist camp, mostly consisting of Southern slaveholders, while those who wanted to put an immediate end to American enslavement called for radical abolition. This group included Brown, Douglass, and Delany, as well as many influential white Northerners such as Garrison. Another proposed alternative for African Americans became the possibility for emigration, a movement that was popular in the early and mid-nineteenth century and that promoted recolonization of African Americans either in Liberia or in Haiti. While Delany was the most outspoken proponent of emigration to Africa, Brown

also advocated black emigration to Haiti. Douglass, on the other hand, believed that African Americans had the utmost right to stay in the United States and fight for their equality.

Despite the fact that the abolitionists we will explore each had unique methods for their project, each also used his exploration of history as a “process of understanding” rather than an end in itself (Clark 46). Culpepper Clark and Raymie McKerrow remind us that history connects past and present in an effort to comprehend present conditions and plan for the future. Inherently an argument, history selectively recalls details to reinforce thought and action (35). Because of their marginalized status, black abolitionists had to refigure history as a more fluid entity than the hegemony had considered it while creating the ideological basis for American nationality. Important to consider is Clark and McKerrow’s argument that history is re-created in each revision of its language (46). Incredibly, African Americans reconceived a past that had been repressed by slavery, using it as a source of strength and community formation for their socially fragmented group.

Here, the vital role of literacy in the African Americans’ struggle for liberation becomes clear. Eric Sundquist goes so far as to say that written acts of resistance have meant more to readers of the day and future generations than the fighting involved in slaves’ resistance (31). Literacy, for the enslaved black especially, meant more than a simple memorization of letters; it also meant “becoming involved in the social practices of the community” (Royer 372). In itself, literacy does not create community, but reinvigorates it. So, for the African American during the mid-nineteenth

century, gaining the ability to read also gave them the opportunity to gain a social awareness that would supply them with the power to bring about change.

Like Toussaint L'Ouverture, the literate black held high standing among African Americans, gaining respect by proving the capabilities of the group. For the abolitionist movement also, African-American literacy provided a way to refute Southern whites' allegations of black inferiority. Robert Dick comments that during the anti-slavery period, the South was producing pro-slavery propaganda, which made the slave's life seem secure and more bearable than the working black's life in the North. Thus, abolitionists had to fight back with something powerful and irrefutable—this ultimately became the Negro orator (Dick 116). Black speakers like William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany in effect, used literacy to call African Americans to action, while proving to the whites that they were, without a doubt, human (Sisco 196). These groundbreaking abolitionists had the difficult task of bridging two historically divided cultures, and engaged in 'literal and metaphorical levels of accommodation, subterfuge, antagonism, direct imitation, and ultimately self-insertion in the margins of the 'authoritative discourse' of a southern ideology of literacy" (Sisco 200). Signifying, then, served as a crucial tool of abolition.

William Wells Brown, perhaps the most literal appropriator of Toussaint in his fight against slavery, earned fame as an abolitionist lecturer for the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society in the mid-1840s. Born into slavery in Kentucky circa 1815—his actual birthdate falling into oblivion due to the poor records of the slave era—Brown was the son of a slave mother and an unknown white father. In the memoir

that opens Brown's book *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, Brown mentions that his maternal grandfather, "it was said, was Daniel Boone," offhandedly claiming a historic American ancestry and aligning himself with a great American hero (11). After roughly twenty years as a slave, Brown managed to escape North via the quite new Underground Railroad. Along the way, a Quaker named Wells Brown aided the fugitive, and Brown subsequently adopted his name as both a tribute and an expression of his own freedom. As critic Jane Yellin notes, for Brown, "the assertion of manhood involved the assumption of a name" (155). Brown spent his next decade as a fugitive from slavery, educating himself in ways that would prove invaluable to his career as an abolitionist.

Just how Brown learned to read remains a subject of conjecture. Biographer William Edward Farrison cites Brown's 1849 speech in Dublin, Ireland, in which Brown said that while in slavery, he bought a Webster's spelling book and bribed the young sons of his master with candy to teach him to read from it (61). Yellin places the spelling book incident after Brown's escape, stating that he purchased the spelling book with "his first wages earned as a free man," which certainly spins the story toward the value of self-education (156). Whatever the origins of his literacy, it seems fathomable that like Douglass, Brown could have eked out help from whites in order to gain an education. After Brown had settled in New York and picked up the abolitionist cause, one of his major battle cries was for the education of the slaves and free blacks. In 1851, he wrote to Frederick Douglass that he saw

more and more the need of our people being encouraged to turn their

attention more seriously to self-education, and thus to make a respectable position before the world, by virtue of their own cultivated minds, and moral standing. Education, though obtained a little at a time, and that, too, over the midnight lamp, will place its owner in a position to be respected by all, even though he be black (*Frederick Douglass Paper*, October 2, 1851).

Much later, well after the Civil War, Brown published a piece in the *Christian Recorder* on the value of education for African Americans. In it, he writes from personal experience:

As the education of a large percentage of the colored people is of a fragmentary character, having been gained by little here and little there, and must necessarily be limited to a certain degree, we should use our spare hours in study and form association for moral, social, and literary culture. We must aim to enlighten ourselves and to influence others to higher associations (January 22, 1874).

Indeed, as we will see was the case with Douglass and Delany, Brown felt that a foundation of education would earn blacks power in the most direct, accessible way for all.

Not surprisingly, Brown champions the form of writing, in particular, as a mode of intelligence for the race. In his essay, "William Wells Brown, Social Reformer," Farrison states that writing was a method of convincing those who Brown could not reach from the abolitionist platform (32). By improving his own literacy skills, Brown became the first African-American novelist with his 1853 publication of *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*. Obviously, Brown realized the latent power in narration, as he explains himself in the *Christian Recorder*:

Indeed, authors possess the most gifted and fertile mind who combine all the grace of style with rare, fascinating powers of language, eloquence, wit, humor, pathos, genius, and learning. And to draw knowledge from such sources should be one of the highest aims of man (January 22, 1874).

Brown himself attempted to harness these various traits in his own writing, particularly, in his revisions of his life story.

Often compared to Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Brown's first record of his life as a slave presents an emotional tale of Brown's servitude and escape. *The Narrative of the Life of William Wells Brown*, published in 1847, lacks the detached, controlled intensity that marks Douglass's own *Narrative*, yet its importance lies in Brown's demonstration of his own trickster-like traits, employed for his survival during his twenty-year-long enslavement (Yellin 160). When Brown published *Clotel* in 1853, he opened his novel with his first revision of his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown*. This introduction, according to critic Robert Stepto, serves not as a personal history but as an authenticating device that signifies on the then conventional white authenticating introduction (Stepto 27). Douglass's *Narrative*, for example, published in 1845, includes a preface by William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent white abolitionist and Douglass's early mentor. Such introductions to African-American writings were standard practice, serving to legitimate the text in the eyes of any white readership. Through reliance on third-person retelling of his life and direct quoting from his earlier writing, Brown strategically distances himself from his own history as a means of validating his work in *Clotel* (Stepto 28). Through language, Stepto notes, Brown realizes that he controls his present and future, more important to him in many ways than literary control over his past (29). 'He is willing to abandon the goals of true authorship and to assume instead the duties of an editor in order to gain some measure of control

over the present, as opposed to illuminating the past,” Stepto surmises (31). Thus, Brown demonstrates, albeit in an awkward, unartful way, the versatility of language as a tool for the ex-slave.

While Brown may have renounced control over the story of his personal past in favor of a rhetorical strategy, he does in fact find uses for history in his abolitionist work. Critic Russ Castronovo emphasizes that Brown “authorizes himself as a historical subject able to comment upon the history of a nation that has denied him history from the outset,” thereby reconstituting history not as a privilege but as a right (527). Castronovo comments on the productive effect of Brown’s various autobiographical revisions, contending that they “do not so much constitute a complete life, inviolate in the authority of its own experiences, as they subtly reconstitute history, implying its mutable and selective aspects” (528). This mutability of history would come to inform Brown’s abolitionist project, permitting him to prescribe to blacks actions that would bring about their elevation and claim ideological space in the white hegemony. In his 1851 speech “St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and Its Patriots,” Brown first used historical writing as a means of social reform, delving into the implications of the Haitian Revolution on African Americans’ struggle for liberation half a century later. Brown’s speech was both a warning and a reminder that blacks not only deserved equal rights but would fight to achieve them, and that a black revolution had in fact been successful (Farrison 33). Important to note is Brown’s journey to Haiti and Cuba in 1840, during which he sought to evaluate for himself the quality of life experienced by blacks elsewhere in the Americas. Farrison contends that Brown’s journey to Haiti inspired within the ex-slave a

conviction that blacks would be able to establish successful communities of their own after winning their freedom.

Brown begins his 1851 speech by pronouncing the lack of leadership among the Haitian soldiers before the rise of Toussaint: “Although the men of color were now the acknowledged soldiers of France, as yet they had no leaders of any note, and were scarcely more than an armed banditti” (“St. Domingo” 11). Without a definitive leader, Brown hypothesizes, the Afro-Haitians had only violence at their disposal, a less than ideal sole source of power. Brown’s rescripting of history, then, proposes a great vacuum within the cause for Haitian liberation, a void that he fills with the emergence of Toussaint shortly into the revolution. Toussaint’s description in the speech so fits the ideals of leadership held by Brown and his fellow abolitionists that it deserves to be cited in full:

The struggle in St. Domingo was watched with intense interest by the friends of the blacks, both in Paris and in London, and all appeared to look with hope to the rising up of a black chief, who should prove himself adequate to the emergency. Nor did they look in vain. In the midst of the disorders that threatened on all sides, the negro chief made his appearance in the form of an old slave named Toussaint. This man was the grandson of the king of Arradas, one of the most wealthy, powerful, and influential monarchs on the west coast of Africa. Toussaint was a man of prepossessing appearance, of middle stature, and possessed an iron frame. His dignified, calm, and unaffected features, and broad and well-developed forehead, would cause him to be selected, in any company of men, as one who was born for a leader. By his energy and perseverance he had learned to read and write, and has carefully studied the works of Raynal, and a few others, who had written on behalf of human freedom. This class of literature, no doubt, had great influence over the mind of Toussaint, and did much to give him the power he afterwards exercised in the island (“St. Domingo” 12-13).

Here, Brown not only reclaims the history of Haiti as a source of strength for his

audience, he goes back to ancient Africa, overlapping and intertwining the three time periods in one linguistic effort to definitively instill inspiration in his listeners. He lays out the qualities necessary for success—dignity, coolheadedness, energy, physical endurance, and book knowledge—assigning them to an individual who had by the mid-1800s earned fame by leading a black country to unprecedented nationhood. Putting Toussaint to work in his vision for African-American liberation, Brown reminds his audience that enslaved blacks are capable of such success: “Who knows but that a Toussaint. . . may some day appear in the Southern States of this Union?” he questions (“St. Domingo” 32). Brown indisputably tells his people how to gain liberty, while masking his directives in an effusive celebration of history.

Brown uses his speech as an opportunity to call black Americans to action—namely violence—against slavery and oppression. He does so indirectly, choosing to filter the threatening dialogue through Toussaint or rather simply show the Haitian hero in action. In the following passage, Brown proves language to be a facile tool for demonstrating his personal abolitionist aims: “I have a sword, and I will not sheathe it,” said Toussaint. . . and then issued a proclamation to the people of Hayti, in which he said, ‘You are going to fight against the enemies who have neither faith, law nor religion; they promise you liberty—they intend your servitude’” (24). Brown offers a complete strategy for change, in which a leader endowed with foresight and fortitude steps forward to direct his followers toward self-reliance. He goes on to place Toussaint in battle, “cutting the French to pieces at Crete-a-Pierrat,” reaffirming his belief in the necessity for a passionate leader who can instigate action among the African-Americans.

Most important, Brown openly links language and violence as integral parts of revolution, each powerful in its own right yet reinforced by the other.

Elsewhere in the speech, Brown signifies on the impact of white ideals on Toussaint's revolution: "Truly did the flames of the French Revolution at Paris. . .set the island of St. Domingo on fire" ("St. Domingo" 15). As we have already seen, the great French philosophy of liberty, equality, and fraternity fueled Toussaint's vision for Haitian independence, yet Brown uses this as a corollary to rehistoricizing the American Revolution and reimagining American history as a whole. As Castronovo tells us, Brown called upon Toussaint and whites' fear of slave uprising to stage "an insurrection against the monumental past," using past events to prove that slaves could earn their liberty (527). Brown soon turns his historical play toward the United States, likening Toussaint to Nat Turner, the famed leader of the 1831 rebellion in Virginia: "Like Nat Turner, the Spartacus of the Southampton revolt, who fled with his brave band to the Virginia swamps, Toussaint and his generals took to the mountains" (23). Thus Brown reorders time, making Toussaint instantly accessible to his 1851 audience members by displaying him as one of great heroes of their recent past. Linking the spirit of the Haitian fight for freedom with the ideals of the American Revolution, Brown reminds the blacks of their own participation in the struggle against the British, a historical fact that had long been omitted from the essentialist ideology of the nation's history. "The spirit that caused the blacks to take up arms, and to shed their blood in the American revolutionary war, is still amongst the slaves of the south; and, if we are not mistaken, the day is not far distant when the revolution of St. Domingo will be reenacted in South Carolina and Louisiana,"

Brown predicts ("St. Domingo" 32). Brown's hybrid view of the past at once communicates that African Americans not only have the impetus to fight for their own cause but also have historical precedents for success.

Interestingly, about a decade after his St. Domingo speech, Brown republished much of the speech in his 1863 book, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*. Appearing in the thick of the U.S. Civil War, *The Black Man* sought to celebrate the many African-American men "who, by their own genius, capacity, and intellectual development, have surmounted the many obstacles which slavery and prejudice have thrown in their way" (*Black Man* 6). In his essay, "William Wells Brown, Social Reformer," Edward Farrison notes that during the Civil War, Brown did begin to fight for African Americans' civil rights—which he realized depended on making white America aware of the rich Negro heritage that had been relegated to anonymity. Thus, Brown's *The Black Man* detailed the lives of fifty-seven successful black leaders in an effort to show that those of African descent were capable of the same greatness as those with European ancestors (Farrison 33-4). That Brown published a revision of his tribute to Toussaint demonstrates the duality of message possible with his text. Whereas a decade earlier, Toussaint had been a tool of inspiration to call the blacks to arms, in *The Black Man* Toussaint steps up to the pedestal of hero, among the likes of George Washington, reassuring African Americans of their proud history in the New World. "When impartial history shall do justice to the St. Domingo revolution," Brown concludes, "the name of Toussaint L' Ouverture will be placed high upon the roll of fame" (*Black Man* 105).

Unafraid to portray a history of Africans in the Americas as inherently powerful and essentially dangerous to white oppressors, Brown captured in words the nature of black community that permitted them to retain a sense of cohesion with the past. As we will see with the work of Douglass and Delany, both free and enslaved African Americans had already begun to develop a national identity, mainly resulting from their rich oral traditions. Despite the fact of blacks' denial of education, we know that blacks managed to keep a certain communal memory alive through storytelling and song. While his technique of self-authorization may have been innovative for an African-American writer during the mid-nineteenth century, Brown's strategy simply operated outside the bounds placed on him by white society. He used his own experiences as a slave to prove that inequality and contradiction are part of American history and to show that African Americans possessed a historical consciousness that could process such contradictions and thus counter the white hegemonic vision with a version of their own strength (Castronovo 531). As an abolitionist, Brown dared to rechart history, aligning events for effect to demonstrate for both blacks and whites the possibilities for those of African ancestry to exercise power. For blacks, Brown outlined the necessity for education as the most effective way to make progress in the United States, but he also called for outright violence against slaveholders and tacitly sought to inspire insurrection with his writing.

Chapter 3 Frederick Douglass: The Past as Linguistic Weapon

For Frederick Douglass, the path to freedom for the blacks did not appear as bloody as it did for Brown—but he, more than Brown, used rhetoric as a weapon against slavery.

Through his powerful oratory, Douglass gained quick fame for himself in the 1840s and becoming the quintessential spokesman for American abolition. Early in his career, he joined forces with moral-suasion proponent William Lloyd Garrison and traveled with

the Garrisonians for a time, retelling his life story to abolitionist audiences. Douglass soon tired of being taken as someone else’s “text”—“not his own text, but one whose signification is in the hands of another, appropriated, and if necessary, deconstructed

according to Garrison’s own abolitionist agenda” (Baggett 107). By 1845, Douglass had published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an*

American Slave, in an effort to disprove the disbelieving whites who felt that he could not have been a slave:

Many persons in the audience. . .could not believe that he was actually a slave. How a man, only six years out of bondage, and who had never gone to school a day in his life, could speak with such eloquence—with such precision of language and power of thought—they were utterly at a loss to devise (*Liberator* August 30, 1844, qtd. in Foner 59).

Douglass would revise his autobiography twice more, each time revealing changes in his

personal ideologies of black elevation and political action as he embraced his own freedom. Eric Sundquist explains that

adopting a national ideology of revolution as a personal strategy of self-creation, Douglass makes authorial revision a mode of revolutionary action—revolt against the dehumanizing law of chattel slavery but revolt, too, against any form of mastery that he has not forged for himself (91).

As we will see, Douglass not only revises his own life story, but also reworks history in ways that illustrate its hegemonic formation, rescripting the past to aid his abolitionist purposes.

Douglass's natural aptitude and gift for narration put him in the forefront of the public eye during the decade or so prior to the Civil War. As an example of the capabilities of the African American, his representative status became so ubiquitous not only because of his traits and message but also, as critic Paul Baggett says, "because he was so vastly and repeatedly publicized, or re-presented" (103). Douglass worked throughout his career to elevate the black people and become the preeminent black leader, a Moses-like figure to lead his people to liberation, and this effort in turn, did gain him much recognition. Douglass's frequent lectures and speeches, his best-selling *Narrative*, and his extensive coverage in the newspapers of the day made him a "figure of pervasively consumed configuration" who could be used to suit the opinions of various groups (Baggett 104). Notably, the black public frequently compared him to Toussaint L'Ouverture. After a speech in Concord, New Hampshire, one reporter wrote, "he reminded me of Toussaint among the plantations of Haiti" (qtd. in Foner 58). The editor of the Concord *Herald of Freedom*, N. P. Rogers described Douglass as "an extraordinary

man. He was cut out for a hero. In rising for Liberty he would have been a Toussaint” (qtd. in Foner 48). This comparison between Douglass and the great Haitian leader forges a path between past and present constructed by the ways the men used language and thereby wielded power.

Eric Sundquist comments that “literacy is linked to the power to enslave and, alternatively, the power to liberate and father oneself,” concepts that Douglass fortunately realized at a young age (107). While Douglass never attended a school, he incredibly taught himself to read after his master, Hugh Auld, forbade his wife to teach him: “if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave” (Douglass *Narrative* 41). Here, Douglass reaches a breakthrough in his personal fight for freedom. Lisa Sisco explains that “Douglass’s most important insight is that the binary oppositions of literacy set up by the culture of slavery are both true and false simultaneously; he then sets out to take advantage of that insight” (200). In his *Narrative* Douglass admits that “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (41). To learn to read and write, Douglass bribed school boys with offerings from his master’s kitchen—and eventually made his way to freedom by writing his own traveling pass.

Douglass, perhaps to a greater extent even than his contemporaries, utilized signifying to its full capacity in his narratives and speeches. Disparately, he publicly parted himself from the power of the slaves’ native language, a stance that seems to pit

him against his own rhetorical strategy, yet as we will see, signifies in its own way on Douglass's growing position in the white public eye. In his *Narrative*, Douglass describes the slaves' singing:

While on *their* way, *they* would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with *their* wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. *They* would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. *They* would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone (25, emphasis added).

Here, Douglass openly shares the slaves' technique for disguising their true message but discusses it as if he had been a casual observer rather than an actual slave. He goes on to tell us that "I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. . .they told a tale of woe that was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension" (*Narrative* 26). Douglass gets at the fact that as a slave, without the capacities of literacy, he lacked the self-awareness that would permit him to connect with his fellow slaves. That Douglass did not understand the black spirituals and work songs on the Tuckahoe and Lloyd's plantations is unlikely, however; as Sundquist notes, more realistically it is a rhetorical gesture to gain the sympathies of Douglass' readers and audience (92). Douglass realized the importance of utilizing the tools of the master—in much of his work as an abolitionist, he attempted to reach the white slave holders by separating himself from slave vernacular. He felt that slaveholders had assigned ignorance to the slaves as a mark of inferiority. By separating himself from the slaves' singing, Douglass not only appropriated the English language for himself but also

claimed it as the means of political rights for all African Americans. This choice relegated elements of the slave culture to the background for Douglass, whereas future African American writers, including Delany, drew abundantly from their histories (Sundquist 105).

Although Douglass mainly relied on the language of the hegemony to convey his arguments, he nevertheless called on signifying as his defining rhetorical strategy. Through an exploration of Douglass's *Narrative*, his biographical sketch of Toussaint L' Ouverture, his famous speech 'The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro', we will see how Douglass signifies on his own personal character, the politics of the United States, and the qualities of leadership valued by Douglass and other African-American abolitionists. Even as early as his first autobiography, Douglass carefully applies irony in ways that both disguise his own project and reveal his true literary intentions toward his oppressors. Most notably, he repeatedly describes his master's capacities for deception. Douglass says of his master, Capt. Thomas Auld, 'he was cruel, but cowardly. He commanded without firmness. . . At times, he spoke to his slaves with the firmness of Napoleon and the fury of a demon; at other times, might well be mistaken for an inquirer who had lost his way. . . He possessed all the disposition to deceive' (*Narrative* 55). Douglass's plan to implicate white slaveholders as mythic tricksters emerges. He continues with a description of Edward Covey, an especially mean slave breaker, who tried to hide his own evilness by working alongside his slaves:

he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. He did this by surprising us. He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise.

Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, ‘the snake’ (*Narrative* 61).

Douglass’s allusion to an archetypal figure of slyness superimposes African mythology on a Southern white slaveholder and counters Orientalist notions of power then held by such slaveholders. By illustrating the strategic deception of his masters, Douglass uses language to shift strands of power in his own direction while deflecting attention from his own deceptive actions.

Turning to Douglass’s 1848 biographical sketch of Toussaint L’ Ouverture, which he published in his newspaper *The North Star*, we see how Douglass began to instill an image of the Haitian leader in the minds of his newspaper audience. ‘History may be safely challenged for an example of higher achievements from so low a beginning,” Douglass contends. ‘In all the elements of true greatness, his character will bear a comparison with that of any hero, ancient or modern.” Indeed, he “devoted himself to the cause of his brethren with such zeal, activity, and talents, that he ultimately secured from them the most cordial and universal obedience, and a respect little short of adoration.” Different from Brown’ s aim of applying the history of Toussaint to instigate revolt among African Americans, Douglass calls upon the Haitian leader to compel his audience to take up Toussaint’ s task of uniting the blacks. Throughout the sketch, Douglass celebrates Toussaint’ s pure African blood, his innate intelligence, his ‘undaunted courage,” and his ‘generous philanthropy,” all nonviolent traits that helped Toussaint in his revolution and that can empower African Americans half a century later. Moreover, per Douglass’s reading, Toussaint was entirely self-educated—a fact we know

was not the case—as Douglass states, Toussaint “seems to have been indebted to his own unaided and clandestine efforts for his education.” Again, Douglass imbues his figure of Toussaint with the qualities he wishes for his own black readers.

In Douglass’s scathing July 1852 address in Rochester, New York, “The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro,” Douglass outwardly distances the blacks from any sense of celebration or pride in the American Revolution. While he does not specifically allude to Haiti, his pronounced denunciation of the United States’ self-congratulatory commemoration events undoubtedly recalls the much different end to a similar war fought in the West Indies. Douglass seeks to show how the U.S. Constitution authorizes slavery and to rile up blacks to take action to end the oppression. Douglass, although he had been a free man for more than a decade at this point, begins his speech by linguistically setting up an opposition between himself and his white audience:

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the Fourth of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day (“Fourth” 182).

By starting off his speech with such an oppositional attitude, Douglass begs the question of why he has been asked to talk on the topic. Douglass, the ex-slave and fierce abolitionist, takes the opportunity to signify on the American Revolution and the nation’s heroic beginnings.

Douglass appeals to his audience by citing the greatness of the forefathers of the United States, going so far as to quote from the Declaration of 1776. He reminds the

whites that “your fathers made good on that resolution. They succeeded, and to-day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly celebrate this anniversary” (“Fourth” 185). The irony sheathed here in congratulatory terms points to Douglass’s true political sentiments, but still he attempts to gain his audience’s sympathy by saying what they expect to hear. However, he strays from this front when he assures his listeners that his opinions of the forefathers of the United States hardly matters, signifying on his social status and previous position as a slave. He continues

Such a declaration of agreement on my part would not be worth much to anybody. It would certainly prove nothing as what part I might have taken had I lived during the great controversy of 1776. To say now that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy (“Fourth” 183).

As Douglass seems to dismiss his own agency on the matter at hand, he at once alludes to the part African Americans *did* play in the American Revolution and recalls the fact that they, as a group, had no say in the political outcome of the war. In the next sentence, Douglass uses a readily accepted white American truism to remark on the unstated reality that America’s practice of slavery was as wrong as England’s political and religious oppression that drove the colonists away.

Shortly into his speech, Douglass veers from his opening pathway, and turns toward an open implication of his audience. He points out the disparity between the white American experience and his own eked-out life:

The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. . . This Fourth July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in

joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacreligious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? ("Fourth" 189, emphasis in original).

Here, Douglass's real message to his audience becomes clear, through outright blame free of ironic construct. Instead, Douglass credits his audience with slyness in expecting his condonement of a celebration that inscribes his own exclusion from their group. Farther on, he issues an ominous warning heaped with significance: "Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic" ("Fourth" 201). Douglass's return to this trickster imagery can certainly be read not only as a statement against the inherent evil of holding slaves but also as a fair warning about the violent capabilities of the African American.

He then turns his speech into a call for African-American action, saying "My business, if I have any here to-day, is with the present. . . We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future" ("Fourth" 188). His change in pronouns quietly redirects his meaning, while his message appropriates the white American's past for his abolitionist goals. "At a time like this," Douglass continues, "scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire" ("Fourth" 193). His signifying has two ends: first, his statement accurately reflects the gist of his speech, while simultaneously disowning Douglass as author of the brimming message. Second, Douglass vividly portrays the dangerous possibilities of language at the

same time that he slyly notes the real threat posed by those enslaved. By the conclusion of his speech, Douglass has created an opportunity for his cause to be heard by a white audience, blatantly stated his opinion on American history, and put forth a treatise on how African Americans should view that history and proceed to put it to work for their benefit.

Most interesting, however, is Douglass's choice of endings. He declares that 'notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in motion which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery' ('Fourth' 203). Such optimism serves to dissimulate the orator's implication in his own message, yet the "forces in motion" echo Douglass's earlier threats. This signifying creates space for Douglass to gain support for his agenda, which unequivocally is freedom for blacks, but which must be shaded with various tones in order to gain the backing of the whites. As critic Paul Baggett notes, for Northerners, Douglass's writings and orations confirmed their suspicions about the evils of slavery in the South, while for Southerners, Douglass's narrations served to confirm that the Northern abolitionist cause was fabricated of false and sensationalized testimonies (104). Indeed, Douglass gleaned much power by permitting his audiences to take from his messages whichever meanings they wished.

Important to note here, in Douglass's only work of fiction, his 1853 short story *The Heroic Slave*, he portrays the Caribbean as a place of respite for blacks. In the story, Douglass revises the 1841 slave revolt aboard the American slave ship *Creole* while sailing from Hampton Roads, Virginia to the Caribbean. Led by Madison

Washington, nineteen slaves managed to overtake the white crew and directed the *Creole* to Nassau in the Bahamas, where they and the other slaves on board went free. The story defines Douglass's call for strong, representative black leadership, embodied by a Toussaint-like figure who has a vision for the liberation of the slaves. Douglass offers an example of how an African American might inspire action through impassioned speech, collaborating with whites rather than pitting a fight against them. For Douglass, the ideal black leader would wield power through language rather than outright violence and would thereby seek to make the cause for slave liberation understood by white sympathizers and opponents alike.

Chapter 4

Martin Delany: Toussaint as Redeemer

During the mid-nineteenth century, Martin Delany became well-known as a radical black separatist who wished for blacks to return to their native Africa, where he felt there existed a dark-skinned aristocracy that originated with Moses. Only on the African continent, Delany held, would African Americans escape white oppression and resume their rightful status (Levine 12). Born free to two full-black parents, Delany celebrated his race in much of his future politics and writing, believing himself to be a deserving leader of the African-American people and, in particular, the free blacks. In spite of this separatist stance, Delany has been credited with extreme political complexity, never fitting the clean definitions of either conservative or radical (Levine 2). Indeed, in later years Delany has been faulted by black nationalists for wavering on his stance of pan-Africanism in his sometimes alliance with U.S. nationalism, seen in such actions as his commission in the Union army during the Civil War (Reid-Pharr 74). Delany shared this U.S. nationalist trait with Douglass, and as we have seen, it is one that relates to the abolitionist cause of forging space for African culture within American society. Robert Reid-Pharr says that Delany “created a model for how the many disparate peoples of the African diaspora might be interpellated as blacks, or more parochially as African

Americans” (90). I would argue that as a leader, Delany envisioned a future for African Americans much like the one Toussaint imagined for the people of Haiti. Without a doubt, Douglass admired the various leadership tactics of the great Haitian rebel—he named one of his sons Toussaint L’Ouverture. Like Toussaint, Delany acted foremost on the behalf of black Americans but recognized the power of the white hegemony and sought to exploit that for his goals.

Like Brown and Douglass, Delany’s activism took form in writing and oration. Robert Levine notes that “Delany was a prolific writer who seems to have been unable to conceive of political action apart from writing” (3). While Delany was young, his mother moved the family north from Charles Town, Virginia, after she was threatened with jail for teaching her children to read. Delany went on to apprentice as medical doctor, and later attended Harvard Medical School for a short time, but was dismissed due to his race. Prior to Harvard, he took up newspaper editing first on his own, as founder of the *Mystery* from 1843 through 1847, and afterward with Douglass, in the *North Star*. During his year-and-a-half long collaboration with Douglass, Delany traveled among the northern states, reporting back to Douglass on the state of abolition in the U.S. In his correspondence, Delany made explicit his utmost belief in education as the means of racial uplift for African Americans, and—less explicit—his belief in the necessity of black violence in putting an end to slavery in the United States. In the April 28, 1848, edition of the *North Star*, he writes, “we must become educated if we ever expect to become elevated, even after we have gained our liberty” (2). Delany, however, lamented the state of African-American education during the pre-Civil War era, complaining that

students often earned a less than satisfactory education. In the *North Star* of December 1, 1848, he reports:

Incredible as this may appear to those unacquainted with schools kept for colored children, yet it is nevertheless true, that nine-tenths of youth are turned out upon the world as having finished their education, with such an education as this, which in all conscience be acknowledged a very bad education. Seldom can be found in our country towns and small cities, a colored youth or maiden who can practically apply to business purposes the arithmetic they have learned at school, or who is able to write a correct sentence (2).

Delany uses the forum of the *North Star* to urge the African-American community to improve the quality of education for black students. Likewise, he capitalizes on his audience to take violent action against white oppressors. Similar to Brown's message, Delany ultimately finds that violence is required for liberation. In the January 5, 1849, edition of the *North Star* he states in response to a reported compliment on his rally for moral elevation of the blacks:

What a reflection for the colored people of this country, that while the oppressed of France, Denmark, Sweden, Wallachia, Tunis, and even Bohemia. . .have demanded a restitution of wrongs, demanded liberty and had it conceded, we are comparatively standing fast, not yet having made the first stride towards it. *And yet our efforts are but moral, our weapons Truth and Justice*" (2-3, emphasis added).

Subtly masking his irony, Delany sends the message that the African-American population ought to be ashamed of its delayed rise to insurrection. Certainly, he felt that a fight would be the one clear-cut means for the blacks to earn their own freedom, a theme around which he developed an entire novel. Critic John Zeugner emphasizes that in *Blake*, Delany "honed one strident message: insurrection—violent purification through insurrection" (98).

Delany first published his only novel, *Blake or The Huts of America*, in 1859. Twenty-six chapters appeared in the *Anglo-African Magazine* from January to July of that year. The full novel (minus the supposed last six chapters) was published in the *Weekly Anglo-African* in installments from November 1861 to May 1862. Arguably, the most influential features of the text lie in its discontinuity and its unfulfilled threat of violence, as the protagonist, Henry Blake, travels from state to state in the U.S., and crisscrosses the Atlantic from Africa to Cuba in a seemingly timeless effort to instigate a revolt among the slaves, which looms unworded over the ending of the novel. As Blake encounters new groups and cultures, he adopts mannerisms, speech patterns, and philosophies to accommodate or blend with each, which in the end leaves him unknowable, much in the same way as Toussaint. Eric Sundquist states, however, that the mixture of literary and political strategies make *Blake* one of the most convincing statements of African-American ideology in the nineteenth century (206). This is the case because Delany, in portraying Henry Blake, strongly depicts qualities of his own double-voicedness, a state in which he is at once conscious of hegemonic ideologies and his own personal strategies. W.E.B. Dubois describes the “double consciousness” of the African American, which embodies Delany’s perception as a writer:

The Negro is . . . gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (qtd. in Lively 169).

Adam Lively interprets Dubois’ idea of double consciousness as existential, begging the

question ‘is there a true ‘self’, or are we composed of the shifting roles that a complex society forces us to play out?’ (170) In fact, as I will show, Blake’s shifting passage between cultures shadows the path of African Americans struggling to make a place for themselves in the New World and proves to be a uniquely African and uniquely *empowering* strategy.

According to Levine, *Blake* was Delany’s attempt to create and celebrate a vision of his own representative identity as a Mosaic leader of his race (177). Delany’s creation of a full-blooded black hero who navigates white culture without the slightest impediment puts into motion his strategy for liberating African Americans. While Blake’s goal is to instigate revolt and bring about the liberation of the slaves through war, Delany himself, as we have seen, relies on writing to fight oppression. Through Blake’s intelligence, education, and communication skills, he finds ways to transcend the boundaries of many nations implicated in the slave trade. At the start of Blake’s journey, he ambitiously and ominously promises that he has ‘laid a scheme, and matured a plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery. . .so simple that the most stupid among the slaves will understand it as well as if he had been instructed for a year’ (*Blake* 39). Thus, he sets out on his passage, solely spreading his plan by word of mouth—according to Zeugner, “Apparently just having Henry whisper in the ear of a receptive slave sets liberty in motion” (101).

Although Delany unequivocally shows Blake’s aim to be a violent one, Blake mainly relates to others peacefully. When Blake does need to protect himself while traveling, his self-defense appears almost peacefully detached—in one case, Delany tells

us, Blake “left his assailant quietly upon the earth” (68). During the one scene of outright violence in the novel, a revolt aboard the slave ship *Vulture*, Blake remains “strangely passive. . . strictly attending to the duties of his office in silence, except when speaking to a black, or spoken to by a white; but was suspicioned by the Americans of being the instigator of the plot” (Delany 237). Indeed, Levine notes that throughout the violence, Blake “assumes a spectatorial role appropriate more to an evaluator than a fellow revolutionary.” This shows Delany’s consideration of the fact that intemperate revolutionism would be less useful to the African-American cause than careful leadership (Levine 208). Even the blatant threat that ends the novel, “woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!” comes not from Blake but from Gopher Gondolier, a Cuban and fellow revolutionary. By carefully dissimulating Blake’s actual participation in violence, in very much a Toussaint-like fashion, Delany plays upon the white slaveholders’ fears of insurrection to signify on the potential power of all blacks in the Americas.

When Delany does show Blake in action, the leader often operates under an alias and assumes alternate identities. For example, Blake pretends to be a slave whenever he encounters a white on his journey, knowing that he will be accepted in this role. To prove the point, the white slaveholders in the book ironically come to appreciate and depend on Blake. At one point, a white ship captain praises him for his intelligence and value as a slave, expressing surprise that his master was able to part with him:

‘by George, you know everybody! . . . Are you a slave boy?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘How did you come to be on the Mississippi River?’ ‘I hired my time, sir.’ ‘Yes, yes, boy, I see! . . . you’re worth your weight in gold. . . You’re a valuable boy. I wonder the Major parted with you’ (*Blake* 81).

By playing to the desires of whites and acting the part of the obedient slave, Blake repeatedly gains the trust of slaveholders which enables him to pursue his subversive plans unnoticed.

As for his relations with blacks, Blake seems to gain instant acceptance wherever he goes. In Arkansas, Henry stops at a slave hut: “Is dis you, my frien?” enquired Uncle Jerry, to whom Henry was an entire stranger. ‘Yes, uncle, this is me,’ replied he. ‘God bless yeh, honey! come in; we didn know ‘twos you, chile!’” (*Blake* 88-9). In New Orleans, Henry heads for a black neighborhood: “‘My frien’, who yeh lookin’ foh?’ kindly enquired a cautious black man. ‘A friend,’ replied Henry. . . . ‘My fren’ , replied the man, meaningly, ‘ah see da is somethin’ in yeh; come in!’” (*Blake* 101-2). Even among mulattoes, Blake’s accommodating attitude helps him get what he wants. In Louisiana, Blake encounters a mulatto along his way: “‘Whose boy are you?’ enquired the young mulatto. . . ‘Gilbert, sir.’ ‘What do you want?’ ‘I am hungry, sir.’ ‘Dolly,’ said he to an old black woman at the woodpile, ‘show this man into the Negro quarter, and give him something to eat’” (*Blake* 70-1). Such welcome does much to quickly further Blake’s cause and demonstrates the principles of community formation already at work in the United States.

In *Blake*, Delany shows how the slave trade implicates more than just the United States—he sends Henry to the West Indies as well as Africa to spread his plot for insurrection there. When Blake, a native West Indian, arrives in Cuba, he admits to his long-lost cousin, the Cuban poet Placido, “I am the lost boy of Cuba. . . I have come to Cuba to help to free my race” (*Blake* 193). More free to wander unimpeded in Cuba than

he had been in the U.S., Blake wanders the “great roads,” where “a Negro could travel without suspicion” and questions those he meets about the conditions of the country (*Blake* 170-71). The conditions for insurrection in Cuba, Blake finds, are much more common in the West Indies; he finds black overseers with the utmost respect of their masters who, in reality, use their posts to “counsel and prepare the slaves for the future” (*Blake* 177). Later, in Africa, Blake further “availed himself of the time and communicated with many of the natives. . . among whom he took his fare and lodging, except when concealed in disguise in the mansion, dressed as a native, being known only to the servants” (*Blake* 219).

On his return trip to the U.S., Blake wins over a Portuguese slave-ship sailor by sharing his knowledge of the slave trade and gains a place as sailing-master on his ship (*Blake* 201). Blake quickly takes advantage of his role on the *Vulture* to throw a jab at the whites on board and gain the respect of the slaves by permitting the slaves to sing while they work. When a white captain complains, he openly defends the slaves’ singing: “Less noise was the command, and they sung easier though it may have been more cheerfully. My people are merry when they work, especially at sea; and they must not be denied the right to sing, a privilege allowed seamen the world over!” (*Blake* 208) Of course, we have seen the subversive power of the slave song and, in fact, soon after the singing commences, a full-fledged revolt is underway on the *Vulture*. During the rest of the sea journey, Blake comes and goes as he pleases, relying on constant disagreements between the other sailors to avoid their attention, much in the same way that Toussaint edged around the attentions of the various governmental factions during the Haitian

Revolution. The white sailors decide that the slaves' revolt has lowered their value and made it impossible to sell them in the United States, so rather, the slaves are taken to Cuba for sale there. As soon as the ship has docked, 'Blake went immediately on shore, and was soon lost among the gazing spectators who assembled on the quay' (*Blake* 237). These passages illustrate Blake's fluidity; like a wave, he washes in among the various others, soothes them with his knowledge, awes them with his skill, deceives them with his appearance, and betrays them in his wake while they remain powerless to stop him. As a native West Indian black, Blake should inherently know how to transmute since his people had a long history of interaction with European and Native American cultures, and have learned to flourish through adaptation.

Delany, like Douglass and Brown, locates African-American community within the Caribbean. West Indian populations during the mid-nineteenth century did in fact include a higher percentage of free blacks than the slaveholding parts of the United States, and even slaves had relatively more freedom apart from their masters. Secret meetings of slaves created bonds among the enslaved unknown to the planters, and connected American slaves to an ancestral past, particularly through the performance of song and dance (Sundquist 60). Most Afro-Cubans, free and slave, belonged to *cabildos*, brotherhoods designated according to African ethnicity that administered to the spiritual and social needs of the community (Paquette 108). A carryover from Africa, *cabildos* preserved tribal cohesion by educating members in the rituals and theology of the tribe, and first emerged in Cuba during the late sixteenth century (Howard 21 and 27). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, *cabildos* had become the most popular form of

mutual aid within the Afro-Cuban community. Since the cabildos generally met in members' homes, they were free of the limitations placed on other groups that met under the auspices of the Catholic church (Paquette 109). On festival days, which in nineteenth-century Cuban society accounted for approximately one day in four, cabildos communally reaffirmed their African past, modified by their American setting (Paquette 34). In many ways, religion within the societies diverged drastically from the Catholic faith, for the African followers made no differentiation between the natural and the spiritual worlds. Afro-Cubans incorporated a ritualized belief in power distribution into their religious practices, a notion often overlooked by whites who dismiss the religion as animal fetishism (Howard 61). Like Haitian voodoo, Cuban culture synthesized certain aspects of the African religious tradition with Catholicism. For instance, the greatest festival day was on the sixth of January, the Epiphany of the Catholics, and also coincided with traditional African celebration of the winter solstice. On this day, Afro-Cubans would dress in colorful costumes and march down city streets in ritual festivity (Paquette 109). Geoff Simons notes that

[in] fact the cabildos often fulfilled a religious role, though not always one the Church approved: the cabildos participated in religious processions, akin to those of medieval Seville, but with the displayed figures and costumes tending to preserve elements of African mythology. One traveller describes 'free and enslaved negroes' assembling 'to do homage with a sort of grave merriment that one would doubt whether it is done in ridicule or memory of their former condition' (101).

The fact that the traveler questions the motivations of the Afro-Cuban religious rituals points to their Blakean transmutability. Clearly, cabildo members utilized elements of European culture in ways that benefited their own interests, yet they did so in harmony

with Cuban traditions which shows that they have both a stake in the larger culture and the capabilities to preserve it.

In addition to the celebratory aspect of the cabildos, blacks also used the organizations to trade information, communicate ancestral beliefs, and offer emotional support to one another (Paquette 109). Cabildos pooled their resources and purchased property as well as freedom for enslaved members. According to historian Philip Howard, ‘they served as both models for their enslaved countrymen and threats to a sociopolitical system that equated blackness with subservience’ (34). Delany includes a description of the cabildo meeting organized by Blake, held in the drawing room of Madame Cordora, a wealthy creole. The group sets up a governmental structure and outlines the details for an army (*Blake* 256). Delany warns that ‘thus organized, the oppressed became a dangerous element in the political ingredients of Cuba’ (*Blake* 257). In fact, as noted by Paquette, high levels of education and general enlightenment among cabildo members made them extremely politically aware, and created within the organization a sort of political hothouse (117).

Conclusion

Africans in the Americas: A Legacy and a Reality

That Delany, Brown, and Douglass looked to the Caribbean as a space open to inscription of black power makes sense when factoring in the relative freedom from white societal constraint. Each abolitionist conceptualized the archipelago as a hub of African-American community formation—indeed, Delany does this most convincingly with *Blake*, but Brown turned to Haiti as a source of inspiration for the capability for black nationhood, and Douglass envisioned the islands as an escape hatch where slaves might find their rightful freedom. Of course, much of the conceptual strength of the Caribbean for the blacks arose out of Toussaint L'Ouverture's historic success there. As we know, the existence of this first black nation in the Western Hemisphere gave rise to a natural alliance between its citizens and the blacks of the U.S., particularly during the mid-nineteenth century. The black abolitionists' appropriations of Haiti, the revolution, and Toussaint-like figures demonstrates how the past can infuse the present with power. Leaders, without a doubt, most wisely look to the past to determine the best way to reach their followers; such was the strategy of Toussaint, who understood his troops' ties to Africa and earned their trust and connected with them through religion and song, two great traditions. Toussaint also refigured the concept of history as a fixed reality

commemorating only the accomplishments of those in power. Employing his outsider status to his own advantage, he broke apart the monolithic text that Western expansion had imposed on their own conquests. He capitalized on French ideals, claiming them for his own purposes and showing that intangible philosophies cannot be cornered by a single group. What Toussaint began by instilling in the Haitian people, American abolitionists picked up fifty years afterward—history can empower any group. Douglass, Delany, and Brown each managed a reorganization of the timeline imposed on American history by the white hegemony. This restructuring of time proved invaluable in sustaining black Americans' fight for freedom.

Still envisioning the past as a source of power for the present, the rhetorical tropes of ancient Africa have come to influence African-American communication and have served to break down the binary between oral and written language. By signifying, Toussaint was able to subtly align himself with individuals who most likely would otherwise have been his enemies. He used tricky language to adopt principles that had previously been denied to blacks, and proved that self-education would most definitely facilitate power. As Brown, Douglass, Delany found, language can also be used to inject difference more slyly than with violence—instigating change perhaps more slowly but with more longevity. Although each abolitionist did see an application of violence as necessary to effect the end of slavery in the U.S., each also had his own view of how it should be used and more important, tempered his call for outright violence through careful use of language.

In the two centuries since Haiti's independence from French colonial rule, the

nation's government has fallen into the hands of numerous corrupt dictators who have exploited the country's resources and its population for their own personal gain.

Violence, rather than sly civility—to borrow a term from theorist Homi Bhabha—has become the norm and reaped much oppression upon Haitian citizens. From Jean-Jacques Dessalines' extermination of the whites in the early years of the nineteenth century to the more recent despotic rule of the Duvalier regime's Tonton Macoutes to the violent ouster of Jean-Baptiste Aristide in the news today, Haitian citizens have endured much bloodshed and tragedy. Despite Haiti's worldwide legacy as the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere and the reverential status that Toussaint L'Ouverture still holds among Americans of African descent, Toussaint's ideals have proved little more than a pipe dream for the people of Haiti. The huge disparity between the historical significance of the nation and the present political and social reality of Haiti results from the extremely complex governmental relations in Europe, the United States, and the Caribbean, as well as the abuse of power among Haiti's leadership. It seems that while Haiti's conquest of nationhood ensured the ideological power of its history, its singular challenge of Western hegemony doomed its citizens to a fate of tyrannical abuse. The irony inherent in the poverty and low literacy rates of the Haitian population today, in a nation that owes its beginnings to one man's genius with language, falls far from one of Toussaint's productive rhetorical gestures. Violence instead has become the rule in Haiti, untempered by dialogue, a bleak turn that threatens to obscure the nation's rich legacy for the very ones who would find most redemption in it—the citizens of Haiti.

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